

Episode 152 - Dr. Mimi Abramovitz: Changes in U.S. Social Welfare Policy: The Effects of Privatization on Human Services (part 2 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're so Sure hi from Buffalo I'm Polish but you don't have to be to enjoy a trip to Missouri it's on South Park Avenue in Buffalo's First Ward neighborhood. Remember when people bought baked goods at a neighborhood bakery for 81 years. Mazurkas offered amazing breads Apple crisps all sorts of baked Incredibles and of course crusty he go you won't regret it and only in Buffalo. I'm Peter Sobota in this episode Dr. Mimi Abramovitz continues her discussion of the rise of new public management and the privatization of Human Services. She describes the application of new public management's business model and the marketisation managerialism and the financialization of human service organizations activities. Dr. Abramovitz concludes by discussing her research of the impact of new public management on the persons in the frontlines of human service agencies. Dr. Mimi Abramovitz is the Bertha Kape and Reynolds Professor of Social Work at the Silberman's School of Social Work at Hunter College and the City University of New York Graduate Center. Her research interests include women work poverty and social welfare policy. Her research has appeared in major academic journals within and outside of social work as well as in the popular press including the New York Times Washington Post Ms. Magazines Women's Review of Books and Women's News.

[00:02:10] Dr. Abramovitz is the recipient of numerous awards for her overall contributions to Social Work and Social Policy and has been inducted into the Columbia School of Social Work Hall of Fame Dr. Abramovitz was interviewed in June of 2014 by our own Dr. Wooksoo Kim associate professor here at the School of Social Work So what exactly do you mean by New Public Management. OK so the public it actually does fit into all this. And what we've been talking about is background for that. So it wasn't a real digressions but we digress. Even so I said one of the five strategies of Reaganomics neo neoliberalism was privatization and I'm particularly interested in that strategy. So New Public Management are this bringing the business model into social services or managerialism has these different names is the way that privatization is showing up as being operationalized on the front lines or the ground floor of Human Services. I started to think that in the past I've sort of wrote about welfare reform I wrote about the big picture issues and then I told you I started hearing all these stories about what was going on. And so then I began to link it to privatization. I said OK how do you operationalize what does privatization look like in the social work. We know what it looks like in big policies. But now we're into the agency work agency administration. What does privatization look like. So in order to think about this my colleague and I Jennifer Zelnick have come up with three phases of privatization which we haven't seen analyzed as a single channel just mentioned that but we haven't seen them discussed in this way.

[00:03:55] I mention them briefly because I actually find them kind of interesting. So the first one is called marketisation and this is where you use the social programs to channel people into the market. So you had Social Security unemployment all the cash assistance programs gay people money and turn them into consumers so they could go buy food and pay their rent and buy clothing. But they bought it in the private market like everybody does. So there was a marketisation aspect of the welfare state. It was like subsidies to private landlords and subsidies to private grocery stores so to speak. But that's common. We expect that all the time. But it increased consumption also. The other thing we did especially in New York. I don't know if it's done. New York City is we started contracting out this provision of services to nonprofit age and social agencies happens here too. It happens upstate too. And so and that's a way of basically it's a kind of a marketization we take the

government money we substitute we give them nonprofit Agee's money so they will deliver the services the services delivered through the marketplace instead of in England when they used to have a national health service and people came to government offices to get their health care or social services and so on.

[00:05:07] So marketization there's a lot there but those are two trends and that really was from the 30s to the 60s that predominated then starting with maybe in 87 the 80s 90s it's hard to pinpoint exactly but we start at this managerialism of New Public Management which is where we're at today which I said is bringing the business model into the human services we are bringing things like. And I'll say more about this in a minute or two but we things like only in production. They actually took the auto companies models of production and adapted them to human services and I say that wasn't one person it wasn't a group just help it evolve. So increased productivity increased quantification documentation but especially funding human service agencies based on outcomes as opposed to inputs that is used to get funded but they would apply to the government or part of a private foundation to give you money to do something to give them a report. Now you have to show the outcome measures before you'll get your money. And they tell you very often the funders tell you what the outcome should be. So there's been some loss of autonomy here also. So that's one of the consequences. But that's what I mean by bringing the business mind set of business principles and ideas into the human services. Another example of that is at least in New York City more and more human service agencies boards are picking MBA people with masters in business or lawyers to be the directors of the agencies instead of social workers. So what's going on here is a question that we should be asking ourselves some of the schools have been responding by creating trying to develop a higher level skills among social or administrative skills so the organization management leadership programs will have to see if they accept social workers even with the skills over MBA and lawyers who mousesports think have better access to money that they're looking for. So that's an interesting change that's been taking place. That's another example.

[00:07:06] The third phrase we've labeled financialization this is starting to combat it's roaring in really fast. So this is where you turn social services into an investment opportunity and you bring investment principles in things like social enterprise social impact bonds for success all also name super basically the general model and we still really try to figure out what this is is that well I'll give you an example. In New York when Bloomberg was mayor he set up a program to reduce recidivism in Rikers Island one of the main jails in New York City. So he brought in Goldman Sachs which is a brokerage house to Goldman Sachs floated the bond people and invest in a program that was managed not by them but by more of a social agency. And then they set a bunch of metrics about what they had to accomplish in terms of reducing recidivism. And if they met their goals they spent less money. And so the people who invested the bondholders got a return on their investment which we used to call a profit. There are variations on the theme. Now the other thing that Bloomberg did which is kind of interesting you know the basic market principles you invest in you take a risk you win or lose. You know let the chips fall where they may. But Bloomberg as I understand the promise Goldman Sachs that his private foundation would bail them out if they lost money. So the home market risk behind financialization is that's just one story that's just a comment about New York City. But this is happening all over the country and it's happening in other countries too.

[00:08:38] And the reason we call that financialization is that that's the word that's not being used like new public management recently called the financialization because it's happening at the same time that there's been a huge shift in the economy and probably all Western industrial but certainly the United States where it used to be that most of the profits came from manufacturing right in the United States. Now most of the profits are coming from the financial institutions. So the whole economy has been financial wise. So we figured this has happening at the same time that the economy is becoming financial. So we just pick that name. It's very interesting now that you have

told me about the larger picture. Could you tell me more about the specifics of your research process. Yes so we really had to figure all this out. Since things we've been talking it really had to figure this out before we could even embark on the research because you know we're not economists we both public policy social work faculty and we knew a lot about this but we had to put it together in our mind so we wanted to find out more about the impact of managerialism on human services. As I said there's been a lot of anecdotal evidence that these changes were going on and they continue to do so but they were really different opinions about the value and impact of these changes. Some people said these are great. Some people said I'm terrible. I don't like working in social work anymore. Simple as that yes.

[00:10:04] Now we really know what we're doing so there was a debate so we said why don't we go to the front lines and see what the frontline workers are doing. Find out in a systematic way not anecdotal. And so we developed a survey. It's an electronic survey in the subject line. Is your voice is needed. The Human Service Workforce Study that was the beginning piece. It's sort of like what we took from beginning what got us interested in this. So people complete a survey through website. Yeah. So what we did get ourselves and that was actually the last that what we did. First we did all this reading on NPM and I told you about. And then we also conducted a couple of focus groups. We conducted a focus group with members of New York City chapter of NSW who become one of our partners in this research project and we also conducted a focus group with the members of the union delegates of local 371 Social Service Employees Union who is another one of our partners in this research project. When to say something about the partners in a few minutes because it's really interesting and local 371 is the public sector and it represents the human resources administration or the social workers who provide TANF benefits and child welfare benefits and things like that. We said we have to get good research as you said you've got to talk to people on the front lines before we assume what they think what we should do and then we created this electronic survey we found out that most agencies now could access their staff electronically they could email them.

[00:11:38] So this is an email accessed a survey by going to a website that has a link to the survey or sending the link to people by email. So we use a new system and City University of New York or I work at Hunter. It's called Quarle checks. Before that I've been using Survey Monkey which I think a lot more people are familiar with but it's exactly the same idea. So sometimes we meet people directly using oblasts. So like NASW in New York City sent an email last to their members other people they let their people know that it was on their website and we made really sure that the survey was totally anonymous individuals and no agencies were identified because we thought people might be uncomfortable talking about what's going on in their agency which is what we talked about and so we really spent a lot of time trying to figure out like what does that mean. How do we ask people questions that will give us some answers. To the operationalization of privatization. Big words you know and big concepts. So it took a really long time to do that. Pilot and we tested it out. We're conducting it. I guess you could say through an electronic survey there were a few places that didn't want to do or couldn't do electronic surveys. We also have some hard copies that people want to actually take them and fill them out. I'm really happy to say but I was really pleasantly surprised that the major human service organizations wanted to be partners. So who do I mean by this.

[00:13:06] This is the human service Council which represents the big federations Tahsin federation and all of them a lot of big agencies that themselves are made up of a lot of agencies and human service council lobbies for them. OK. So human service counsel said they would help us spread the word by distributing it to their member agencies. I said New York City chapter of NASW it's one of the biggest chapters in the country sent it out to their membership. The third one was United Neighborhood House in our Neighbourhood House represents 38 different settlement houses and community development agencies. So they were willing to send that out. Then there's another group

called the Behavioral Health Coalition which represents mental health and substance abuse and they are helping us out. And then I mentioned local 371 service employees union so these people signed on to me two years ago when I was talking about some of these problems that were going on so it would be interesting to research. They roll their eyes. Something happened they're feeling a crisis. I said to one meeting of some of these agency heads I said Well you know I was trying to get a compensation going and I said well it didn't cause a sea change going on in agencies isn't there one person said Now wait a minute it's not a sea change. Something oh he's going to say it's less he said it's a tsunami. So I think the agencies are really feeling it and I think the workers are then the final thing that happened that really pleased us. There's a newspaper it's a free hand out newspaper called The New York nonprofit press. Actually it's all statewide. It may be upstate and downstate and they put out a monthly hardcopy and daily electronic copies.

[00:14:50] They heard about us and they called us and said Do you have a media sponsor. And we said what's that. Whoever heard of a research project having a media sponsor. So we said what's that. And he said well we would write stories about you and we could get a little advance on some of your findings. So they in February 27 when we launched it they featured us in a really lovely story and then when we reached a high watermark halfway point and what we want is a number of surveys we want they got a second story they've been carrying a permanent link on their website and on the newsletter to this study so people just can go there anyone wants to fill out the study who's listening audience right now can just go to the New York nonprofit Press Web site and you'll see a link to this study and you can just fill it up because it's actually because the New York nonprofit press has been involved people from all over the state. After all it's mostly New York City but we are getting people from other parts of the state. So if people from other parts of state would get enough of them we can analyze that kind of separately from New York. So feel free if anyone is listening you want to do that a little plug. I don't have an 800 number like the politicians do but I can send it to Web site. And so what they did is they sent this link out through their organizations. One of the problems we faced was that we were dealing with the agency heads who were very supportive and sympathetic but as they said people don't always answer their e-mails.

[00:16:18] So they were sending e-mails to program directors program directors to the front line. So there's always a loss in terms of how many people actually see the survey. So we've asked them I call it the top down problem. So we've asked them and they have sent it out several times. That's great to have support from partners and I can see that you are responding to their knees by doing this research. I think that's what started to happen but it took a long time for them to feel the need enough to because you know practitioners and agency directors are so busy trying to just keep their organizations rolling research feels like an extra. But now they have really gotten into it and I think maybe another reason is that everything is evidence based. Now and that's one of the things this research is about the role of evidence based practice in human service Livvy its impact. But maybe they've gotten more used to having to produce data and they know they can't make a arguments with that data. So all of a sudden there's a wish for data. So I think it was good timing that we are doing this at this time. It's very interesting. So do you have any preliminary result out of focus groups or we just we really haven't analyzed it yet. I can say a little bit about it. So we launched it in the end of February that for months we have over 17 hundred completed surveys. And if you've done social science research you know that's huge. That is huge. So I can see that people need.

[00:17:53] People wanted to complete this survey. Absolutely. That's what we felt we want to cut 3000. So we're over a halfway mark but that's exactly what you hit the nail on the head. Because in a couple of things pointed that out that has won the large number of returns in a short amount of time. Second quarter quadratics gives you some metrics. We get our own metrics and they show you how many people are complaining how many questions 80 to 90 percent are completing all the questions almost all the questions. This takes a half hour to fill out the monthly about 100 questions. They're all will know check questions. So all the questions are being filled out and if you know

you've done this research for half the time they come back incomplete and then the third thing is we leave space for comments we're getting comments like paragraphs long. So people are taking time to write comments. I think people are like these frontline workers and nobody asked them their opinion. And we need their opinion to figure out what's going on. But some of them are hurting and or concerns and we feel like we hit a nerve. What they really want to say something. What is your timeline. When do you think you're going to finish your data collection and analyze it so that we can see there is right. Well we began by saying we keep the survey open for six months but we'd like to get 3000. We kind of have the people whom are willing the low hanging fruit.

[00:19:19] People say now so it's going to be a little tougher to get the next twelve hundred so maybe in another month we'll have 8800. We're going to see if we can make one more big push getting everybody to send it out again. We've been also giving out flyers so that at meetings people get fliers that has the Web site on itself and it's very interesting because you can watch Qualtrics tells you the dates. We know someone blessed we can see a surge right after that little Bartók gets rolling. So we don't really have any findings the public does also let you do a little analysis so we've been looking at the demographics were curious who's studying it. So it's really been eyeballing we really haven't done it systematically. But most of the people I say 75 80 percent of the respondents are women which is characteristic of the field right. But I think we have more people of color than is characteristic of the field. So we have I think the last I looked at was like 40 percent people of color 60 percent whites. So that is I don't think surveys capture that. So I think that represents who's on the front lines in social work and particularly in the public sector we have two other unions that sent out that represent HRA is represented by three different unions and all three of them have sent out a blast. So we're very happy about that.

[00:20:37] We seem to have fairly good union representation maybe 20 25 percent of the service people said they were union members some probably from the unions that are partners but some are just union member because there are other unions in the nonprofit sector has some unions not a big force they are but they are. And it seems to be a nice spread. We don't know what the agency is but yes what sector it is so we seem to have a nice spread between the different sectors and our hypothesis is that doesn't matter what sector the same things are going on in different forms but the same forces the PM is showing up in different ways and different places and that the way our questions are formed we see as people for most of the questions. Do you think what we asked you about is a major problem a minor problem not a problem at all. One doesn't happen here. So we try to make it really objective. Maybe people will tell us they like this. So we want to know what you know what people think and so with the kind of questions that they're responding to with these kind of answers are got a section on service provision or what's going on. Does the computer get in the way between you and your client is your agency having to work with fewer staff. Does anything happen to the hours that you work. Are you starting to charge fees when you didn't before that. I mean I don't have the questions in front of me but those are some of the ways we operationalize it. We also asked about changes in working conditions because it is reorganizing the way work is being conducted and agencies. So in terms of time in terms of who gets to do work and also for example are they using more fewer credentials. What's happening to social work as people are trying to save money.

[00:22:13] Are they hiring more B.S. W's and fewer MSW or MSW. Being supervisors and this is another big changes taking place. We also asked about practice. How is it interfering with the practice relationships ups what's happening just services working conditions practice. And then we have a few other questions about workplace violence and some stress measures. And then the standard demographic. So we haven't analyzed all those but you can see we figure we have years data or analysis work to do. But we're very very excited about this and the response we're getting. I think it is a very interesting and exciting project. And thank you for sharing with us your exciting project and also the new concept for most of us new public management and I think you explained

the historical background of new public management and also the concept of it and as a closing Woodmont Why should social workers be concerned about this topic. What is the practical implication of this study and this concept. Could you speak to that. Well I think that's really an interesting question for me. Think about and what we've thought about all along and we hope that social workers are concerned we feel that they are because of what the evidence is. But one of the things is that the profession like most professions. We study major policies like welfare reform and affordable health care gentrification. We study trends like gentrification. We study our clients how are they doing. How are they responding to our services. But we rarely study ourselves.

[00:23:52] So this is a work for study and so we feel like one reason that social work shouldn't be concerned about it because it's time to study ourselves. We are being deeply affected and challenged by this new way of organizing services so that's one reason it's time. It's been a mistake not to study ourselves. First of all by studying ourselves instead of remaining invisible in the stories that are told in the policy decisions that are made it renders our take this way we put our take on these emerging service trends and their vision. We make our tape our understanding visible. It's because of we don't do this we remain invisible. We've been invisible because when we don't volunteer so much. Second no one asks us for our input. How do policymakers come into the front door of an agency. What are you doing. How is our policy affecting you and the work you do. What do you think should be going on. So this is really meant to give frontline workers a chance to provide that input and maybe even exert some influence on how best to structure services. So they will no longer be made without their input and we don't have to just be reactive. This should give us some evidence data hard data to take a leadership role. We often find ourselves reacting but with this data we can actually get in front of the curve. We can start to say 3000 social workers have said that these are not a problem or up this is the problem and this isn't the problem. We think that policy makers have to address this and these would be local.

[00:25:21] This would be city level policymakers and in the end why are we doing this is because it will give human service workforce an opportunity to advocate for better jobs and services better jobs themselves better services to their clients and after all better services decline is why we're all in this wonderful. Thank you so much for speaking with us today and I hope we can hear from you again when you complete the study. Oh I'll definitely be happy to buy me back and I'll come and talk more about it. But thank you I really appreciate the opportunity. Your questions your interest this has been really very enjoyable for me too. Thank you. You've been listening to Dr. Mimi Abramovitz discuss the effects of privatization on human services and in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu.